

## Roberta Carreri

# Learning from Teaching

Theatre is an artisan craft. It cannot be learnt from books. The physical presence of other people - master, director, other actors - is necessary to learn the craft. In theatre the presence of other people is essential both during apprenticeship and when what has been learnt is put into practice. Theatre responds to a deep necessity of the human condition: relationship.

I have twenty-five years of experience behind me, and this makes me a potential teacher. What pushes me to teach and what - in spite of pressing demands - keeps me from doing it more? Now I can say that teaching is a necessity for me. It is a way for me to make my own what I know by transmitting it.

Being a good actor does not automatically mean being a good teacher and the other way round. A teacher must know how to teach, imprint and mark; how to put on other people the mark that we in turn have received from someone that we have chosen to mark us with their experience.

All I know, I have learnt from others. Often a look has been more precise than a hundred words.

### TO LEARN FROM TEACHING

In 1974 I had been part of Odin Teatret for five months. A group of actors from different countries had come to Odin Teatret to participate in a workshop that was to last six months (the longest in the history of our theatre). Torgeir Wethal led the acrobatic work sessions, Iben Nagel Rasmussen those with composition. Tom Fjordefalk and I - as pupils at Odin Teatret - followed these sessions together with the workshop participants. Else Marie Laukvik worked on the technique of improvisation and the creation of a study around the theme of life in a Japanese village. As all the actors from the group were engaged in pedagogical activity with the participants, Eugenio Barba decided to give to Tom Fjordefalk and me the task of

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directing the participants in training with props (poles, sticks with ribbons, flags...). From the day I joined the group, I had trained daily with props, but now I found myself rediscovering my work. While showing the participants the exercises, I had to be very precise so as to allow them to repeat them. I had to focus my presence and my actions, which meant that my work suddenly was growing.

*An angel runs  
Thru' the sudden light  
Thru' the room*

Jim Morrison

In this way a change of consciousness happened in me. Suddenly I was not the most raw recruit: I was responsible for other people. Although I was aware of the fact that I still was not a master, I felt strongly that in the moment of transmission I became part of the tradition to which I had chosen to belong. I had also to learn to see what functioned and what did not function in the work of the people who had been entrusted to me. I had to detect what was hidden behind that which resulted from my words and from my example. I had to understand what did not work in the pupil's way of thinking. This was for me a new form of training: to concentrate my attention on the work of another person for a long span of time and identify myself with what happened in another body/mind. This taught me to instantly translate what I saw into physical information, which is to say to develop a memory of actions that are not done by me directly, but the dynamic of which my body can recognise.

Later, after years of training and performances, the evolution of this ability would be very useful to me to take inspiration from the other performers' acting.

*A ghost precedes us  
A shadow follows us  
And each time we stop  
We fall*

Jim Morrison

### TO LEARN TO TEACH

At the beginning of my pedagogical career, I taught exercises that in turn I had learnt from my colleagues, often without understanding their meaning in the theatrical context. I taught them because it was what I had learnt, without realising that the learning of these exercises in my case was part of a long term education, while for the participants to learn them was a unique and isolated event.

Years later I found myself conveying the training that I myself had elaborated. The meaning at a theatrical level of the work with the different exercises was clear to me at that point. I had created the exercises myself and chosen them for their function in terms of my developmental needs. But still we had the problem of the workshop being very limited in time in relation to what our apprenticeship at Odin Teatret requires. This invariably generated frustration both in me and in the participants.

How could I, in the course of three days, lead the pupils so as to give them an experience of what it means to work with continuity? How could I make them find an uninterrupted form of varied scenic presence for more than two hours? How could I infect them with a need for rigour and discipline, that would allow them to attain the maximum from themselves?

For ten years I have been searching for words, the examples and the mental images that can allow me to transmit to others the essence of my experience: the approach to the work, the discovery of continual presence and how to model the energy that produces it. For my part I am convinced that

the form of presence with which I enter the working space and meet my pupils, determines my first direct influence on them. Their availability to learn depends on this.

It is clear that it is not possible for me to transmit all my experience in the course of a workshop of a few days, but each time I do a workshop I need all my experience. What and how I choose to transmit is decided in the moment when I meet the pupils. The workshop is the result of my meeting these pupils now. I must be able to react to the given situation to allow experience to be passed from me to the pupils.

*In the Torah, the Hebrew "to know", often used in a sexual context, is not about facts but about connections. Knowledge, not as accumulation but as charge and discharge. A release of energy from one site to another.*

Jeanette Winterson

### THE NEED FOR A MASTER

When I started to work in theatre years were needed before the hours of training and the hours of work for performances would give results. Now when I do workshops of three days or maximum three weeks, I meet a great desire to learn fast.

I don't remember when I started to hear the sentence that today I hear daily at Odin Teatret: "I don't have time". In the beginning we were rich in time; we had all the time in the world. A dilated time, within the four walls without windows in our working spaces. A time outside the time of clocks and swelled by that concentration during which we learnt, discovered, repeated and created. I needed *years* to learn the most elementary acrobatic exercises. I needed *years* to learn to work with body composition, *years* to learn to sing, *years* to own the work with different resonators, *years...*, *years...*, *years...* In those years, letters were sent with a stamp. Now, in the era of speed

and electronic post, I am constantly confronted with young people who think that it is possible to acquire experience and knowledge as one buys coffee at the supermarket. Of course you have to make the effort of choosing the brand, but then it is enough to pay and you go out with your packet: "instant coffee", "instant knowledge". The workshop culture, where you collect a curriculum full of important names, is created in this way.

But if the continuity of a daily work extended in time does not exist, these moments of great inspiration fall like seeds on cement. On the other hand, if this daily work exists, these meetings with masters are extremely important. This I know from experience. At certain periods my actor's work has been very solitary, even working in a group. In those moments I felt the need to let myself be inspired by people who had a totally different experience from mine.

When I do work demonstrations or workshops of a few days I am aware of the fact that what the pupils can learn is limited, but I also know that what they can take with them is an inspiration to develop their work in a new direction. A real process of apprenticeship requires a much longer time and a constant presence and an availability on my part to be inevitably hated by the pupils; or "loved despite". When you are a pupil you love and hate the master. When you are a teacher you love and hate the pupil.

I am forty-six years old, I am no longer young, but I am still not old. For years I have taken upon me the responsibility of becoming a teacher. I continue to work in this direction continually developing my pedagogical work. For the moment though, I feel I should still concede myself some time to grow as an actress, creating and presenting performances in the first person. To become a master means for me to put in close-up the needs and potentialities of the pupil, putting



Roberta Carreri (right) during a workshop in Milan. Photo: Tony D'Urso

myself in the background and moving through the body of the pupil.

*What you see is not what you think you see.  
Pardon me?  
Shadows, signs, wonders.  
Who are you? What is that you contain? What  
is salted up in the memory of you? Memory  
past and memory future. If the universe is  
movement it will not be in one direction only.  
We think of our lives as linear but it is the spin  
of the earth that allows us to observe time.*

Jeanette Winterson

When I was fifteen years old I dreamt of

being educated, as in Ancient Greece, by a pedagogue who even had a beard and white robe, who would walk with me and reveal the mysteries of the Universe, a philosopher, a person who beyond answering my questions, would give me a vision of the world, would teach me a way and propose a sense to my existence. I imagined I would pass my time talking, walking under the sun or the stars and sitting in the shadow of great trees or tall columns.

From my adolescence I remember having had need of a person who would push me to overcome my limits, following me along the

way; a person who would be available to accept being deeply hated at certain times. It is painful to go beyond one's limits: to grow. The spontaneous reaction is to hate the person who makes you suffer. In a very deep part of me existed a Need. I see apprenticeship as a way of confronting one's own Need. If it is real you persist, and one day you will feel pleasure in your work. Otherwise, you stop.

"If tears were gold, I would be a millionaire", says an old Danish song. If the litres of tears that have slipped into the gutters of Odin Teatret together with the water of the showers were gold, they would be enough to settle the foreign debts of many countries of the world.

Eugenio Barba, besides being my director and the artistic director of Odin Teatret, has also been my master. Physically the other actors taught me the training work, but it has been Eugenio's presence in the room and his observations that obliged me to continue even when I felt that I could no longer do so. To do chains of somersaults and learn acrobatic exercises at seven in the morning made me literally throw up. But after running to the bathroom I would inevitably return to the room to confront my limitations on the acrobatics mat (eternally smelling of sweat) and break through those limitations.

The master has to be an ocean of patience, the pupil an ocean of trust. History is not in the words: it is in the struggle. I think that only if your own work is the result of the meeting with the work of a master, can you in turn become a master. This is probably what characterises each true tradition: the transmission of the role of the master.

Translated from Italian by Julia Varley

ROBERTA CARRERI (Italy/Denmark) is an actress and pedagogue at Odin Teatret. Since 1974 she has toured internationally with most of the group's productions and with the work demonstration *Traces in the Snow* that she created in order to explain her process of work as an actor.